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Challenges of novice teachers in Covid-19 at a rural school in Thabo Mofutsanyane district, South Africa

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Abstract— This study explored the challenges faced by novice teachers during COVID-19 at a selected rural school in the Thabo Mofutsanyane District, Free State province of South Africa. It adopted the qualitative multiple case studies research method to analyse the problem statement comprehensively. Telephonic semi-structured interviews were held involving eight novice teachers (five females and three males) selected from two rural schools. Moreover, an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis was used for data analysis. The results revealed novice teachers lacked psychological and emotional support services during COVID-19. They became vulnerable to the uncertainty of tomorrow, stress, depression, isolation, anxiety, the need to change to online learning abruptly, and the need to adapt to advanced technology. The results further found that Covid-19 and its related consequences will deteriorate as novice teachers become used to the new norm of doing things. Therefore, it is recommended that decision-makers and school managing bodies should support novice teachers by developing structural support strategies to help improve teacher well-being and mental health. Because without proper coping mechanisms, the negative feelings experienced by teachers could affect rural schools' teaching and learning processes.

Keywords: Covid-19, Novice teachers, Rural schools

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I. INTRODUCTION

THE Covid-19 pandemic has brought changes that need attention in rural schools. Many rural schools are overcrowded, lack electricity and water, poor infrastructure and sanitation. This affects the overall emotions that novice teachers exude toward their job, with disastrous consequences for the education system. According to Busalitic (2018), job satisfaction can be seen when a person works constantly to satisfy their own needs and the needs of their family. This could thus mean that if the job does not fit the employee's initial expectation, it could result in underperformance and ultimately be followed by a decision to quit the job (Yuxin & Farooq, 2019). It is essential to note that job satisfaction can be intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic satisfaction deals with factors satisfying a person that come from within the person (Lee, 2017). It includes a sense of success at work, relations with colleagues, job stability, customer relations, and efforts to unearth one's skills (Bektaş, 2017, p. 630). Extrinsic satisfaction concerns a person's satisfaction depends on their work environment (Bektaş, 2017). For example, working conditions, pay level, relations between colleagues, rewards, and benefits (Wu & Ye, 2017). When the Coronavirus gained momentum in early 2020, schools were closed. In South Africa, the Minister of Education announced the closure of schools because schools were not equipped to ensure pupils' health and safety. Literature shows a lack of parental interest in children's education, insufficient state funding and resources, underqualified teachers, and multi-grade teaching in rural schools (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). The Covid-19 pandemic has compounded the situation further with water shortages, inadequate sanitation, and overcrowded

classrooms. The Coronavirus disease has become something that everyone has had to learn to live with. However, living with the disease proves more challenging when people's basic needs are unmet. This is the case with basic education in South African rural schools. Teachers' overall job satisfaction depends on whether their basic needs are met. When South African schools were re-opened in 2020, novice teachers faced pre-existing issues, such as overcrowded classrooms, electricity outages, and lack of running water from the taps. There were also insufficient learning materials, a lack of internet connection, and a lack of personnel. South Africa's Coronavirus task team devised protocols for schools to adhere to decrease the spread of the virus; however, rural schools in South Africa have faced insurmountable problems in their implementation. For instance, it is difficult to practice social distancing due to the lack of tables and chairs. As Dube (2020) observes, implementing online learning in rural schools is a great challenge since they lack network access and e-learning devices, coupled with the lack of computer literacy among novice teachers. The emphasis is on novice teachers to collect authentic data for this research. Because novice teachers have limited experience handling a sudden massive change in their work environment. In addition, the content taught in university does not adequately expose them to different work conditions, thus making it difficult for them to adapt to change. Deacon (2016) found that most student-teachers do not get enough teaching and observing time in their chosen schools during their work-integrated learning. Also, he highlighted the fact that they are not sufficiently exposed to authentic classroom environments. Nonetheless, the positive side to exposing this kind of information is that it may eventually help develop teacher education in South Africa and strategies to improve the condition of rural schools.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employed Herzberg's two-factor theory of motivation. Herzberg et al. (1959, as cited in Jones, 2011) presented the two-factor model of work motivation and the motivation-hygiene theory derived from Maslow's hierarchy of needs. In Herzberg's theory, job satisfaction research was conducted to determine which aspects of an employee's work environment contribute to contentment or discontent. Thus, certain elements lead to favorable attitudes toward work, and others lead to negative attitudes toward work (Alshmemri, Shahwan-Akl, & Maude, 2017).

According to Herzberg's (1966) theory of motivation, there are two types of motivating factors in the workplace: first, satisfiers (motivators), which are the main drivers of job satisfaction and include factors such as achievements, recognition, responsibility, and work advancement; and second, dissatisfiers (hygiene factors), which are the leading causes of job dissatisfaction. Herzberg developed this concept to explain how a person at work might simultaneously be satisfied and dissatisfied since these two elements operate in distinct sequences (Alrawahi, Sellgren, Altouby, Alwahaibi, & Brommels, 2020). Thus, in this research, the assumption is that if the work environment of novice teachers does not ensure their health and safety during the COVID-19 pandemic, this could lead to feelings of dissatisfaction and an overall crumbling education system. Therefore, this theoretical framework benefits this research by proving this statement as true or false.

III. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The research explores the challenges of novice teachers in the COVID-19 pandemic at rural schools in Thabo Mofutsanyane District, South Africa. Its research question was: what are the challenges that they experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic at rural schools in Thabo Mofutsanyane District, South Africa?

IV. METHODS

Research approach

The study employed a qualitative research approach. In qualitative research, issues or phenomena are understood through the interpretations of participants (Mohajan, 2018). It used an interpretive paradigm, which emphasizes interpreting and understanding data from the participant's point of view to understand issues (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017a). However, interpretivists believe individuals' experiences should be considered in social contexts shaping reality (Pham, 2018a, b). This paradigm is advantageous to this study because it allows participants to voice their opinions within their social context. This study further used multiple case studies as a research design to collect detailed and relevant data during real-life situations. This design was helpful because it generated an in-depth, multi-faceted understanding of a complex issue in its real-life context (Huby et al., 2011). This means that case study methods reveal multiple sides of a particular story, thus ensuring its reliability. In addition, it requires that the researcher interprets the participants' experiences and observes their environment, which the case study method allows.

Data collection method

This study used telephonic semi-structured interviews for data collection. This method was beneficial as it allowed the researcher to collect open-minded data, explore participants' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about a particular topic, and delve deeply into personal and sometimes sensitive issues (DeJonkcheere & Vaughn, 2019). Thus, it is advantageous as it allows participants to express their views on their own terms. The researcher asked open-ended questions that required participants' thoughts related to the challenges of novice teachers in the COVID-19 pandemic at a rural school. Similarly, this method benefits the research by not limiting how the questions are asked and responded to and allowing new questions to develop during the interview. However, one disadvantage is that this data collection method requires too much effort, time, and a researcher to know what they are doing

(Adams, 2015).

Participants

Participants involved eight novice teachers purposively selected from a school in the Thabo Mutsanyana district in the Free State Province of South Africa. There were five females and three males. All participants were identified as well-informed individuals about the investigated subject matter and the availability and willingness to participate (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). They were Sesotho speakers and resided in a rural community. In these unprecedented times of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools have specific protocols to follow to keep their staff and learners from contracting the virus. Therefore, the best option for the researcher is to collect data from a school with which they have a good affiliation.

Research sitting

This study was conducted telephonically with novice teachers who teach at a secondary rural school based in QwaQwa, Maluti-a-Phofung municipality, in the Eastern Free State. This site is been deprived of running water since 2016. This school reserved water in tanks for hygiene when taps had no water, as learners could use the water to flush the toilets. This site also experienced untimely power cuts, and participants, as part of the community, struggled with electricity, water access, and where households use pit latrines. On this site, most people are unemployed and depend on the South African social grant for survival. However, the school's functioning faces challenges, as it is understaffed, classrooms are overcrowded, and there is a lack of teaching and learning materials and a semi-functional feeding scheme.

Data analysis

This study analysed qualitative data through thematic analysis. According to Tjandra, Osei, Ensor, and Omar (2013), thematic analysis extracts meanings and concepts from data to identify, evaluate, and record patterns or themes. This technique is valued in comparing different research participants' viewpoints, revealing parallels and differences, and uncovering surprising findings (Tjandra et al., 2013). Moreover, it offers a more accessible analysis method, especially for those just starting their research career, since it is an adaptable approach that can change and meet the demands of numerous investigations (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). Data analysis was done precisely, consistently, and thoroughly by recording, systematizing, and revealing the techniques in sufficient detail for the reader to judge whether the process is trustworthy (Nowell et al., 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2013). First, the researcher must familiarise with the data, that is, to get a general feel of the data within the transcripts and make rough notes along the way. Second, similar data must be organised and grouped for a more straightforward interpretation.

Third, one must search for patterns in the data. According to Braun and Clark (2013b), there are no hard and fast guidelines about what constitutes a theme. The relevance of a theme defines it. If one has a small data set (for example, one short focus group), the coding step and this stage of finding preliminary themes may overlap significantly. Fourth, one must revise these patterns. The researcher examines the data connected with each topic to see if the evidence supports it and whether the themes operate within the complete data set. Fifth, one must define themes. The researcher must conduct and produce a detailed study of each theme, questioning what tale this theme tells and how this theme fits into the larger story about the data, determining the essence of each theme, and naming each theme in a concise, punchy, and informative manner (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Lastly, one must combine and note down the data. Thematic analysis is relevant to this research because, in most cases, when asked to speak about a particular event in their lives, people turn to stories to narrate their individual experiences. Therefore, the thematic analysis would allow the researcher to analyse the data collected from the various participants while ensuring the study's credibility.

Ethical considerations

This study obtained ethical clearance from the University of the Free State and permission from the Free State Department of Education. The

approval to collect data from the school was granted, and the participants were willing to participate. Participants participated based on informed consent. Confidentiality and privacy were ensured in this research. That is, the anonymity of individuals and organisations participating in the research was ensured. The rights of the participants were ensured, and participants were free to withdraw at any stage of the data collection process. The participants were not harmed since the necessary COVID-19 protocols were followed. Respect for the dignity of the participants was prioritized. Any affiliations in any form, sources of funding, and any possible conflicts of interest have been declared. Any type of communication concerning the research was done with honesty and transparency. Any type of misleading information and representation of primary data findings in a biased way was avoided.

V. RESULTS

Challenges of novice teachers in Covid-19 at a rural school

Lack of psychological and emotional support services

The findings revealed that novice teachers experienced a lack of psychological and emotional support to cope with their well-being and the demands of teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic. The following responses from two participants said these:

"It is everyone for himself or herself because everyone is experiencing strain resulting from learners being divided into smaller groups, as a measure against COVID-19. This means that throughout the day, one teacher teaches at least four groups of learners the same content" (Participant 4).

"I teach grade 9 until grade 11. I am the only Life Orientation teacher for those grades now. The other Life Orientation teacher teaches grades 8 and 12. The only break on my timetable I get is during break time. Most of the time, I do not relax and have my food in peace; I must prepare for the next class while eating. Ho ya kgathatsa [It is exhausting]" (Participant 1).

Thus, it can also be noted that teachers are not the only ones affected by the psychological and emotional strain. The learners are affected as well. One participant shared the following:

"There was an incident where a group of grade 10 learners had not attended a Life Orientation class since the beginning of the term because the Life Orientation teacher forgot them or perhaps did not know they existed" (Participant 2).

Staff shortage to handle learners

The findings suggested that a staff shortage to handle the school learners could affect novice teachers in the Covid-19 period. Furthermore, some novice teachers do not consider teaching at a rural school their first preference. However, this study indicated that novice teachers might not even consider changing careers if an opportunity exists. The following responses support this:

"I do not think so, no. But if the opportunity presents itself, I will not hesitate. Private school teachers somewhat have it easy in terms of resources. They have flushing toilets, electricity, and the teacher-student ratio is appropriate. They can function effectively during this pandemic" (Participant 3).

"Despite all of this, I still love my job. And I will not be changing schools anytime soon. I was born and raised in this community. Therefore, these challenges do not scare me as much" (Participant 1).

The findings from in-depth interviews have revealed a staff teaching shortage, which adds to the stress of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, teachers who have not been teaching are intimidated to teach in a rural school because of the lack of resources.

Lack of devices to access online learning

The findings suggested that novice teachers cannot access devices that afford them online learning. These devices have proved to be essential during the COVID-19 pandemic. The abstract from two participants declared these:

"My school does not have the equipment for online learning, let alone staff who are capable of implementing online learning. Only a few of us young teachers have been exposed to computers. The rest have never used a computer. You should hear the older teachers wanting help when they encounter a problem on their smartphones. "Rona re ma bbt ngwanaka, hare tsebe lutho ka dintlo"

tse" (jokingly), ["They say we were born before technology, that is why we do not know these things"] (Participant 3).

"We have one staff computer that all of us share. Mostly, it is used for printing question papers. Besides that, we do not need to use it because our administration clerk captures the learners' marks, and we just collect their progress reports" (Participant 4).

Lack of electricity affecting internet access

The findings demonstrated that lack of electricity affecting internet access could challenge novice teachers at a rural school. Participants mentioned that most parents or guardians could not afford internet devices for their children's online lessons, including electricity and connectivity issues and a lack of funds to purchase the data. The following responses from the interview sessions support this:

"Another thing is with the frequent electricity cuts happening in this area and network issues, online lessons would not be possible. How will our learners buy the data and devices required for online learning? Online learning is out of the question when we consider these challenges. This is an impoverished community" (Participant 2).

"80 percent of our learners do not have smartphones because they come from low-income households. Therefore, if we need to communicate with a specific parent or guardian, we write them a note and ask for their signature at the end to know they received it" (Participant 1).

These explained that the socioeconomic status of the surrounding community could challenge and affect teaching and learning in rural schools as most people depend on government social grants for survival. Therefore, they cannot afford to purchase devices for online lessons.

Poor infrastructure

The findings indicated that poor infrastructure could affect novice teachers at a rural school. Hence, there is overcrowding in the classrooms due to the lack of furniture. Tables, chairs, and textbooks are insufficient for learners to practice social distancing. This also affects the process of teaching and learning immensely. The following responses from the interview sessions support this:

"Yes, because now I am afraid to teach most of the time. I see how social distancing cannot be adhered to in the classroom. I rush through content so I do not find myself and my learners in that confined, overcrowded space for long. If a class takes two hours normally, I teach it for 1 hour 30 minutes" (Participant 3).

"What about our right to a safe environment conducive to learning and teaching? Besides, it has been said that one of the measures to reduce transmission of the Covid-19 pandemic is being in a well-ventilated space. With this said, I believe safety comes first. If they die, learners will not have access to education" (Participant 3).

From the above, it can be deduced that these challenges have been noticed and considered more seriously since the pandemic. These challenges existed before the Covid-19 pandemic but were regarded as the standard. The following responses from one participant stated this:

"I think so, yes. Already, we are scared to come to work with this Covid-19 disease. Imagine being told that the disease thrives in such an environment, but you have no choice but to go to work every day" (Participant 4).

Safety of staff and learners

The findings demonstrated that the safety of the staff and learners could challenge novice teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even the government informs people what constitutes a safe environment and the kind of environment the Coronavirus thrives in. This has made rural school environments unsafe for novice teachers.

VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study sought to explore the challenges of novice teachers in Covid-19 at a rural school. The results revealed that novice teachers face many challenges, including a lack of psychological and emotional support services, staff shortage to handle learners, lack of electricity affecting internet access, lack of devices to access online learning, poor infrastructure, and safety of teachers and learners. These challenges are associated with rural schools that serve rural communities with low

socioeconomic status. Similarly, Daily Maverick (2021) reported that this site struggled with dirty water, dry taps, and constant water interruptions for years. All of those mentioned above pose dire consequences for learning and teaching. Thus, an already strained education system is weakened even more. As stated previously, the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed inequalities within the education system. For instance, learners from previously advantaged backgrounds could quickly adapt to the situation by continuing their learning during the lockdown due to the financial and emotional support they receive at home.

In contrast, learners from previously disadvantaged backgrounds discontinued their learning when schools closed. Online learning is impossible in rural areas where electricity is problematic. Teachers also had to adapt to new ways of delivering content they may not have been trained in. For many novice teachers in rural areas, this meant being hit by yet another devastating reality: they may not have the necessary skill set and resources to do their job. And this may influence their emotional as well as mental state. Therefore, measures should be put in place to counteract the effects of Covid-19 on the well-being of novice teachers and the challenges experienced in rural schools in the Free State province of South Africa.

Thus, this study recommends that the Department of Education ensures a healthy working and learning environment for novice teachers and learners. By making teacher support services readily available for them. Additionally, computer literacy should be taught to these teachers. In other words, computer laboratories must be made available in rural schools to teach learners and teachers critical skills since the world has entered the age of information and technology. Moreover, the government should also provide learners in rural schools with online devices and internet access. However, the limitations to successfully implementing these recommendations are the electricity and network coverage issues in rural communities and the long-term sustainability of computer laboratories and devices. Rural schools have strained their budget allocation to maintain these things. Also, the community has a low socioeconomic status to equip learners with devices and the data needed for online learning. Nonetheless, the government must still supply rural schools with educational services to ensure its employees' and learners' health and safety. A healthy working environment motivates teachers to provide effective learning and teaching.

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Table 1: Biographic results of participants

Participants	Age	Gender	Highest qualifications	Teaching experiences	Teaching modules	Grade Levels
Participant 1	24	Female	Bachelor's degree	0-1	English & History	8-11
Participant 2	30	Female	Bachelor's degree	1-2	English & Life Orientation	8-11
Participant 3	29	Male	Bachelor's degree	1-5	Accounting & Sesotho	8-12
Participant 4	24	Female	Postgraduate Diploma	0-1	Accounting & Business studies	10-12
Participant 5	35	Female	Bachelor's degree	1-5	English & Life Orientation	8-11
Participant 6	30	Male	Honors degree	1-5	English & Social Sciences	8-11
Participant 7	25	Female	Bachelor's degree	0-1	English & Business studies	8-12
Participant 8	25	Male	Bachelor's degree	1-2	Mathematics	8-12